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TOWN OF SPROUL
Refractories Company Town
Sproul
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5971

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF SPROUL
Refractories Company Town

HABS No. PA-5971

Location: Near U.S. Highway 220, Blair County, South
Central Pennsylvania

Brickyard built: 1911-17

Company houses
built: 1911-17

Contractor: George Gibbonney, Cottage Planing Mill,
Everett, Pa.

Significance: Sproul is an example of a classic company town
built and owned entirely by one company to
facilitate the operation of its adjacent plant.
Begun by the Standard Refractories Company which
reincorporated as General Refractories in 1911,
Sproul has a simple plan of four streets and two
house types. Except for changes in the houses'
siding treatments, it retains much of its original
character. The houses were sold to individual
residents in the 1960s. The transition from
company ownership was completed in 1982 with sale
of the water tower and water lines to the private
Sproul Water Association.

Project
Information: The results of the study of refractory brickyards
and towns was published in 1993: Kim E. Wallace,
Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories
Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania
(Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage
Project and Historic American Buildings
Survey/Historic American Engineering Record,
National Park Service).

The contents of this publication were transmitted
to the Library of Congress in report form. See
additional information on the refractories
industry under HABS No. PA-5973, Refractories
Company Towns, Mt. Union, Huntingdon County,
Pennsylvania. Research notes, field photos and
copies of historic photos collected during the
project were transmitted to the AIHP Collection,
Special Collections, Stapleton Library, Indiana
University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, PA 15705.

History

Like those in southern Huntingdon County, the ridges of southern Blair County were often covered with ganister. There was enough to support the growth of two brickyard towns just over a mile apart in Greenfield Township. Their brickyards were both built in the 1910s, and after 1922, both were owned by General Refractories Company. Despite their proximity, the plants were always maintained as separate facilities. Sproul and Claysburg, the two towns associated with the plants, developed differently and had very different histories.

In 1910 William A. Stanton, formerly employed by Harbison-Walker, persuaded seven other men to join him in purchasing the Sandy Ridge Fire Brick Company in Centre County and financing construction of a silica brick plant at Sarah Furnace, renamed Sproul, in southern Blair County. The next year the partnership bought two more existing plants and incorporated as the General Refractories Company.¹ Its Blair County property was sited at the foot of ganister-covered Dunnings Mountain to compete with the Mount Union plants making silica bricks for the steel industry.

The local supply of ganister was so good that in 1913 a group of local investors built a second plant at Claysburg about a mile and a half north of the first. They formed the Standard Refractories Company led by Thomas N. Kurtz, a Johnstown native who had been in the refractories business since beginning work as a teenager in the office at A. J. Haws' Refractories. Kurtz worked for two of the refractories companies in Mt. Union before moving to Hollidaysburg to be closer to his own works at Claysburg. He oversaw its growth to twenty kilns with a 140,000-brick capacity then sold it to General Refractories in 1922.²

The first of the two plants in Greenfield Township, Blair County, was built at Sarah Furnace, a location named for an iron furnace built there in 1832 and operated intermittently until 1882. Iron ore was mined across Dunnings Mountain near the village of Ore Hill. A lime kiln, the ironmaster's mansion and barn, and a large tenant house survive from this period. During its peak years the furnace was the center of a small community. In

¹"The General Refractories Company," Bulletin of the American Ceramic Society (November 15, 1943), 363.

²Kurtz helped found the Mt. Union Silica Brick Company in 1901 and was then hired by Mt. Union Refractories after it started production in 1912. He continued his career in refractories after selling the Claysburg plant in 1922, gaining control of U. S. Refractories in Mt. Union. He oversaw its sale to North American Refractories in 1930 and remained with that company as vice president until his death in 1938. "Late T. N. Kurtz Claysburg Brick Industry Founder," Altoona Mirror (August 18, 1954). "Claysburg Brick Companies Merge," Altoona Mirror (August 5, 1922). "Big Brick Plant Deal Is Closed," Altoona Mirror (August 23, 1922).

addition to a church, store, and post office, there were at least seven cabins built for furnace workers. The Sarah Furnace post office was moved to Claysburg in the mid-nineteenth century, denominational churches replaced the Union church, and by the time the furnace closed for good, most of the population had dispersed. The community's revival eventually resulted from efforts that began in 1872 to make the area accessible by railroad. Track grading construction started in 1891 and the line running north and south between Altoona and Bedford was finally opened in 1910.³ It passed through Claysburg and next to the old Sarah Furnace property making both places feasible sites for brick making.

General Refractories built five kilns and five foreman's houses at Sarah Furnace in 1911. By 1917 there were twenty-two kilns and sixty-eight company houses and a population of about 275. The post office was re-established and the town was renamed Sproul after company president William C. Sproul, who also served six terms as a Pennsylvania state senator and one term as governor (1919-23). A short row of independent commercial and residential buildings fronted the town along the state road between Bedford and Altoona. The plant was opposite, on the west side of the road.

To the east, behind the tavern and stores, company houses were lined along France, Reed, Railroad, and Ganister streets. Reed Street led up Dunning's Mountain to Ore Hill past ganister floes and quarries. A dinkey track between the quarries and the plant passed directly in front of the houses along Railroad Street. The first five buildings on this street were the original foreman's houses. They were larger and more stylistically refined than the others. Each had four bedrooms and a bathroom on the second floor; a kitchen, dining room, and living room on the first, and a full basement. The floor plan, clipped gable roof, and full-width front porch with Doric posts gave these houses a colonial revival form that appeared in small towns across the country at the beginning of the century. The other houses, however, are smaller and have a more vernacular form common in rural Pennsylvania. They originally had six rooms--three second-floor bedrooms and a first-floor, hall-parlor and kitchen-ell plan. The houses were built by contractor George Gibbonney who owned a planing mill in Everett about twenty-five miles to the southeast and who was responsible for other company

³Africa, 121. Margaret Monahan, The Long Journey: 1804-1954, 150 Years of Progress, Claysburg, Pa. (sesquicentennial publication, Claysburg, 1954), n.p. George R. Walker, "Human Relationships and Brickmaking: A Sociological Analysis of a One-Industry Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1953), 46-48.

houses in the region.⁴ The houses had a privy in each backyard, cold running water from the company water tower in the kitchens, and one light in each room run by electricity from plant generators.⁵

The superintendent replaced the ironmaster as resident of the brick mansion and as head of the paternalistic community. Two other management-level employees occupied the tenants' house. The company replaced the log church with a simple frame structure. The first superintendent set a precedent of regular church attendance and leadership for his successors.⁶ In 1924 the superintendent detailed workers to build a baseball field. A company team played in the county league until there was a shortage of players during World War II. A company maintenance crew was responsible for Sproul's streets and streetlights and for the church and houses. During the summer a third of the houses were painted a uniform color so that each house was painted every three years and the town had houses of three different colors. The superintendent made regular visits into town to inspect company property and give employees' wives an opportunity to make requests.⁷

First-hand attention was given to residents as well as to the physical condition of the town. When an employee was injured or was unable to perform his usual job for any reason managers found some work he could do to continue his income or reduced or waived the rent for his house. Brick orders fell off drastically during the first months of the Depression and the plant was closed for a time in 1930. The company reduced housing rents and set up its own make-work programs of maintenance and improvements around the town and plant. When one of Sproul's three stores closed, the company opened its own and issued credit coupons in lieu of future earnings. The coupons became legal tender in the wider community, accepted for bus fare, school lunches, and tickets to the Claysburg theater. A farmer who rented company-owned land worked off his rent by cultivating additional land for employees to use as subsistence garden plots. A limestone kiln on the property was re-opened and became another means of employment as well as a source of fertilizer for employees' gardens. After six

⁴Lola Bennett, The Company Towns of the Rockhill Iron and Coal Company, Robertsdale and Woodvale, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service, 1990), 85.

⁵Paul MacDonald, interview by Margaret Mulrooney, Sproul, Pa., 1989. Walker, 62. "Sproul Takeover Completed," Altoona Mirror (October 13, 1982).

⁶Walker, 161-62.

⁷Walker, 161-62, 164, 248.

years of intermittent orders the plant returned to full capacity production in 1936.⁸

The company's efforts to help employees through the period of unemployment suited and grew out of local values and circumstances. Sproul was self-contained and virtually entirely company-owned. Its residents were all natives of the surrounding rural area and tended to share an individualist and isolationist outlook. They were uncomfortable with public assistance, and local management's concern that they continue working earned the company gratitude that lasted through World War II. Company loyalty and anti-union sentiments that were typical of the area were evident in 1939 when union organizers tried to hold a meeting in the McKee a few miles north of Claysburg. Local residents prevented the organizers from speaking and drove them away under a barrage of fruit and vegetables.⁹

Organizing attempts began at the Sproul and Claysburg plants about 1936, but only about a dozen workers were reported to show any interest, and organizers were subjected to at least three other adamant public rejections. By 1947, however, sentiments were reversed and General Refractories employees invited union representatives to Sproul, and a local of the United Mine Workers was instituted in April. The anti-union stance eroded during the 1940s in part because returning servicemen formed the majority in the post-war work force and their experiences in the outside world made them more amenable to the concept of unionization. More important in changing attitudes were changes in company policy that angered and alienated most workers and prompted a number of wildcat strikes.¹⁰

Modernization of company organization and practices was accelerated during the early forties and at the local plant level resulted in an ending of face-to-face paternalism. Rather than promoting foremen and superintendents from within the plant ranks, younger college-educated men were assigned the position for short-term stints as part of a company-wide management training program. Veteran employees who might have expected to move into these jobs themselves resented being supervised by men inexperienced in the process and work of brick making and in working with people. These foremen did not live in Sproul or participate in community social life.

⁸Walker, 54-55, 57. "Business Increases," Altoona Mirror (June 28, 1933). "Many Workers To Be Called Back," Altoona Mirror (June 28, 1933). "General Refractories Has Better Earnings," Altoona Mirror (July 20, 1934).

⁹Walker, 57-58. "Union Meeting Is Ended As Crowds Gather On Scene," Altoona Mirror (October 11, 1939).

¹⁰Walker, 106-08.

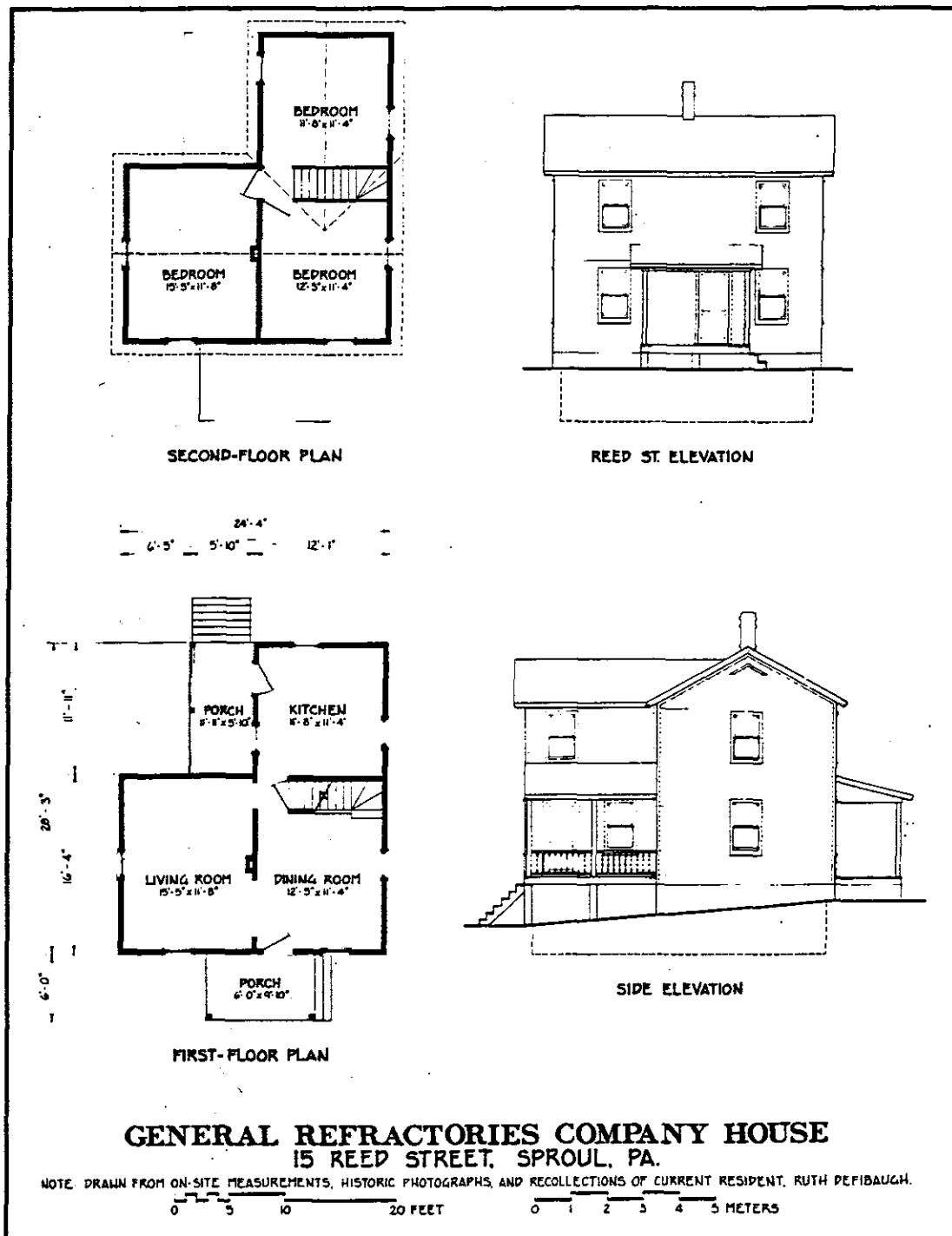
Unlike his predecessors, the superintendent in 1953 had never been in the residential section of Sproul and did not know all of his employees by name. Even though a company maintenance crew still painted and repaired company houses, they were no longer given priority over plant maintenance and other, once routine general maintenance work in the town was done only sporadically. Rents were raised and collected regularly without consideration of tenants' health or level of employment. General Refractories sold all of the houses to individuals in the 1960s, and in 1982 it ceded the town's water tower and lines to the newly formed Sproul Water Association, formally completing its de facto disavowal of the paternalistic role.¹¹

The residents of Sproul have always viewed their town as a distinct entity even though it has remained an unincorporated village at the southern edge of the county. They have long resented the tendency of their neighbors and local governments to overlook it or, even worse, to view it as an appendage of Claysburg. Although it is certainly not that, it is true that Claysburg was the service center for Sproul as for other smaller communities around the township. After 1934 Greenfield Township schools were consolidated in Claysburg and, to residents' dismay, Sproul lost its grade school, an institution that contributed to their local identity. Students walked the mile-and-a-half to Claysburg, and tended to preserve their subregional identity in social groups and participation in sports activities. They should not have felt out of place among Claysburg students whose fathers were also brickyard workers and in a school whose newspaper was called the Brickbat.¹²

¹¹Walker, 75, 248-51. Blair County deed records. "Sproul Takeover Completed," Altoona Mirror (October 13, 1982).
"Sproul to Advertise for Waterline Replacement," Altoona Mirror (February 16, 1987).

¹²Walker, 167-69. Monahan, 54, 104-05.

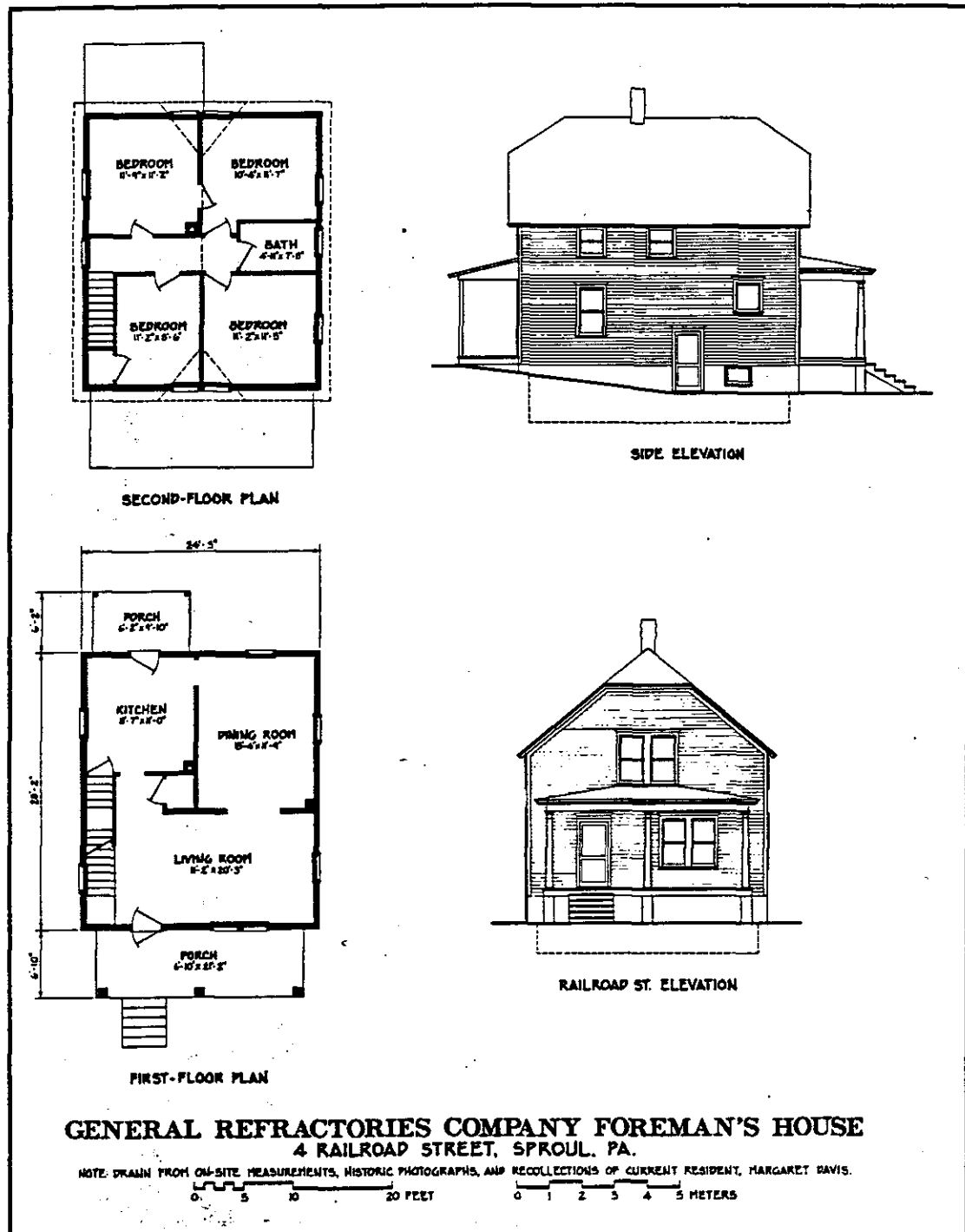
APPENDIX I



Elevations and floor plans, 14 Reed Street, Sproul.
Drawn by Isabel Yang.

Reproduced from Wallace, Kim E., Brickyard Towns: A History of Refractories Industry Communities in South-Central Pennsylvania 1993 (Washington, D.C.: America's Industrial Heritage Project and Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record, National Park Service).

APPENDIX II



Elevations and floor plans, 4 Railroad Street, Sproul.
Drawn by Isabel Yang.

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